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DEMOCRACY AND MORAL PROGRESS.

MR. WALT WHITMAN, in his recent impetuous, impulsive, but original and striking book, "Specimen Days and Collect," p. 211, uses this strong language: "I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their slough, in materialistic developments, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and æsthetic results. . . . It is as if we were somehow being endowed with a vast and more and more thoroughly appointed body, and then left with little or no soul." And again, p. 206: "For know you not, dear, earnest reader, that the people of our land may all read and write, and may all possess the right to vote, and yet the main things may be entirely lacking." These sentences express in a mild form opinions that are frequent in this remarkable volume, which, by the way, will be a surprise to some who regard their author as an altogether fleshly poet.

Now, Mr. Whitman speaks from experience. He has traveled over the country, has lived in remote parts of it, and has closely studied the people and their institutions. He is, moreover, an enthusiastic believer in republican government, perhaps the most ardent democrat living. This criticism is the result of his faith. He admonishes in the spirit of love. He is severe because he hopes so much, and sees so much to be at stake in the experiment of liberty.

To prognosticate the future of democracy is not an easy task, but oversensitiveness to fair criticism will not make it easier. The issues are concealed from all but honest and penetrating eyes; and even these must be clear of the film of prejudice. It is desirable to know the facts; but the facts are not readily accessible. Least of all will they disclose themselves to optimist or pessimist. The

times have no doubt gone by when men like William Cowper can read aloud to ladies a book like "Joseph Andrews." But neither the reader nor the listeners could have looked without horror at the view presented by a modern ball-room, at the waltzes, polkas, and general dance movements of young men and women of society. Conscientiousness may have changed its front, while conscience may not have gained in sensibility. Immorality has assumed another form; but is it so certain that its character is essentially altered, or its degree abated?

"They tell me, Sir John," said George III. to one of his favorites, "that you love a glass of wine." "Those who have so informed your majesty," was the reply, "have done me great injustice. They should have said, a bottle." What courtier would venture, in these days, to make such a remark to a king? Even at banquets such drinking as was common among gentlemen, half a century ago, is unknown and would be considered disgraceful. The most refined people take very little wine, even of the lightest. This seems an immense advance. But who can say how much of the improvement may be due to moral principle, how much to the fashion of the period in which we live, and how much to the regard for the conditions of bodily health, so remarkable in an industrial age like our own, which obliges even gentlemen to have clear heads? No temperance indicates moral improvement but such as may be attributed to moral considerations. Respect for health or economy evinces a fine sort of selfishness, nothing more; and respect for fashionable usage does not indicate so much as that. The elegant English essayist, Robert L. Stevenson, suggests that Thoreau abstained from wine because, living in America, he never tasted any that was good. It is more likely that he abstained because he regarded the drinking of wine as a sensual indulgence; or because he dreaded the evil effects of it on society; or because he thought that, like tea and coffee, wine would deaden his vital power, and so diminish his enjoyment of nature. Either of these reasons may be esteemed noble. But it is not probable that many temperate people can claim motives as worthy for their temperance. If they could, a higher strain of conviction on this subject would prevail, a conviction that would close bar-rooms, and render "corner-groceries" unprofitable; for a power of moral conviction equal to this would raise the level of common opinion on the subject.

In 1770, Horace Walpole wrote to a friend: "I do not know a tea-spoonful of news. I could tell you what was trumps, but that was all I heard." "The gaming," he said, "is worthy the decline of our empire. The young men lose five, ten, fifteen thousand pounds in an evening." Putting together the things best worth finding, Walpole enumerates: the longitude, the philosopher's stone, the certificate of the Duchess of Kingston's first marriage, the missing books of Livy, and all that Charles Fox had lost. The losses of Fox at the gaming table were notorious. Gambling was the fashion among gentlemen and ladies in that generation. To be in debt, to borrow money, was universal among people in society. So completely established was the custom that no disgrace, no feeling of moral degradation was attached to it. In spite of his recklessness, Fox not only kept his social position, but preserved his sweetness of character. Nothing of the kind would be possible now. Gambling has been remanded to the lower orders of men. The law is against it; custom frowns on it; the practice is banished from respectable company. But has it been exterminated, or has it merely assumed another form? A recent article in this Review on the "Ethics of Gambling," which some thought too severe, drew from a Western man a protest accompanied with terrible statistics, all going to show that the writer of the article had "hardly scratched the surface of the subject." The evil, it was maintained, threatened to undermine our institutions, being more virulent in a democracy than it was in the time of Fox, the fences which confined it to a certain class being taken down, and a coarser instinct being admitted to the gratification, the excitements of which are extended to business and politics as well as to amusement.

But will not popular education, so general under our democratic forms, correct this lamentable tendency? Alas! there is too much ground for thinking that education, instead of raising people above their level of actual attainment, simply supplies them with what they desire, and thus indirectly confirms in them a low standard of taste. Ideal, heroic, stimulating studies like Greek, Latin, Philosophy, are neglected for "useful" lessons in physics or dietetics. Besides, education waits on character; and, unless the style of character be lofty and strong, education may turn out to be a mischief, like putting improved tools into the hands of a burglar. Mr. Herbert Spencer, who called attention to this

fact a generation ago in his "Social Statics," has lately repeated the warning. The old saying, "In much wisdom" (that is, learning) "is much grief," may be true in more senses than one; and its truth may be particularly evident in a democracy where it is left with average people to decide what shall be taught in schools. In a society like our own, the passion for "getting on" operates with fearful power upon intellectual ambition. Success is the goal toward which all are striving, and we know what success means. No doubt schools and libraries multiply, but these alone do not attest the moral elevation by which the growth of communities is measured. They are certainly to be encouraged, but along with them must go efforts at making a grander type of man; otherwise knowledge may prove a snare. In older countries ancient universities, institutes, the influence of an educated class, the traditions of centuries, guarantee the permanence of "liberal studies"; but here no such safeguards exist; the danger of accommodating to popular taste the standard of mental accomplishment is, consequently, greater with us than it is in England or on the continent of Europe.

Whether or no democratic institutions are favorable to political purity, may be left to the decision of those who will take the trouble to compare the ideal of our state with the condition of things actually existing in Washington, New York, or any center of political activity. The power of "the machine," the prevalence of "wire-pulling," the faith in party men and party measures, the confidence in partisan tactics, the strength of the doctrine that to the victor belong the spoils, the difficulty of establishing what seems the common-sense principle of Civil Service Reform, the general opinion that ours must always be an administration by parties, and that an administration by parties must from the nature of the case be to a considerable degree venal, do not promise a celestial Utopia either in the near or distant future. Granting that England's anticipation of the principle of merit in the choice of her civil functionaries may be due in a measure to her habit of keeping the appointment of officials in select hands, leaving to Government the task of appointing its servants, while politicians discuss other matters more within their conceded province, one might suppose that such an example, though not literally imitable, would act as an encouragement to the principle rather than as a disapproval of it,—might, at least, animate us to engraft so fine a

system upon our democratic institutions and prove that republics can be just. The greatness of the difficulty in the United States ought to nerve Americans to the greater endeavor. Unfortunately, this inference is not often drawn. Politicians who have grown gray in service enthusiastically extol the advantages of the "spoils system," which, notwithstanding their eulogium, is practically the opprobrium of democratic politics, threatening more than anything else to drag our institutions through the mire. The few men who toil at efforts to elevate them must take the position of reformers, as if the principle they recommend were an innovation savoring of aristocracy. No sign so clearly indicates a tendency to ignoble greed as this, none so evidently exhibits a base appetite for "the loaves and fishes." In a word, statesmanship of the higher order is, by confession, rare in governments that regard statesmanship as a natural growth. The democratic faith in "the bare man" is hardly favorable to dignity or excellence of attainment, while the frequent change in official stations is all but fatal to stability of personal character. No doubt the future may repair the injury of the present time; but the evil is actual not prospective, and there is danger that it will become too deeply rooted to be eradicated without revolution. At all events, the situation can be mended now better than it can be half a century hence, and the hope of amendment, if it comes, will not be due to the average construction put upon the democratic idea, so much as to the prevalence of reason over instinct—that is, to moral rather than political causes.

Does democracy promise an elevation of the religious sentiment? That is too large a question to be answered here in a few sentences. One or two specifications must suffice. The writer of these lines attended lately an Episcopal church. It chanced to be Communion Sunday, when the mystery of supernatural grace was to be celebrated for the spiritual benefit of believers. The minister, a "broad Churchman,"—so very broad that he passed over the distinctions which are understood to divide the "faithful" from the "faithless,"—gave an invitation that might have been accepted by a Unitarian, a Deist, a Rationalist: an invitation harder to resist than that of an old-fashioned Socinian. This was a concession to the untheological spirit so prevalent in our communities. But was it an evidence of a moral advance as it was, unquestionably, of a sentimental one? Is it a sign of

moral advance that a distinguished "orthodox" preacher, an American of Americans, a democrat in the grain, applies the epithet "hideous" to doctrines which he himself calls "fundamental to the whole orthodox theology of the world"? Such a declaration is entirely in accordance with the general democratic sentiment, but certainly it is inconsistent with orthodox profession. The wonder is that it should be so loudly applauded by people of exact thinking, who ought to know the meaning of language. This circumstance alone shows how deeply the democratic sentiment has penetrated into the recesses of the mind and has obliterated the ancient distinctions of creed. The doctrine that one man is as good as another leads to an abrogation of the supernatural belief on which the church rests, and must, sooner or later, disintegrate the unity of faith. This appears from the satisfaction with which hearty democrats welcome the leveling of religious distinctions, the overthrow of ecclesiastical barriers, the abolition of doctrinal tests. In a word, the restoration of moral fiber to the religious sense will scarcely come through an extension of the democratic principle as commonly understood.

Mr. Emerson, in his address on the "Progress of Culture," read before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, July 18, 1867, enumerates the astonishing gains made by the republican idea within a few years, with the comment: "Now, if any one say we have had enough of these boastful recitals, then I say, happy is the land wherein benefits like these have grown trite and commonplace." Mr. Emerson, as we know, was a dauntless optimist, and his prophecy was made nearly twenty years ago, soon after the remarkable outbreak of hopefulness which followed the civil war. After the virtual abolition of slavery, everything seemed possible in America. All questions found an easy answer. The energy of the people had not subsided, and might be counted on as adequate to the severest tasks. Candor compels the admission that the enthusiastic prediction has not been fulfilled. Some of the reforms have not been accomplished; others have been achieved in advance of us by aristocratic communities, like that of England, for example; several were wrought out under the sway of selfish motives, "the search for just rules affecting labor," "the insurance of life and limb," for instance. "The marked ethical quality of the innovations urged and adopted" which the orator insists on, must

not be hastily accredited to the democratic idea, whatever may be our opinion of its reality. Similar results attend the progress of civilization in all countries. The reform in regard to women is more advanced in London than in New-York, at Cambridge than at Harvard. The agitation for the abolition of capital punishment, for the sanitary arrangement of prisons, for the elevation of the working classes, goes on in Europe as energetically as here ; in fact, much more so, most of the literature appertaining to those subjects being imported from abroad, through England. Let us admit that there is moral progress ; but let us admit, at the same time, that the progress is a result of civilization in the world, not in the Western Hemisphere especially. It may, indeed, be ascribed to the growth of a humanitarian principle, but it is not yet demonstrated that this principle attains its best results under an unrestricted democracy. The modified democracy of Great Britain, under what Mr. M. D. Conway has well called "a crowned republic," may, in the end, prove favorable to ethical interests. It is, at all events, pertinent to ask in what degree moral advance is indebted to the effort necessary to overcome obstacles. Thus far the experience of mankind proves that "easy virtue" is but another name for vice. Moral endeavor usually precedes moral improvement. Reform must not be facile ; if it is, the moral element will assuredly be wanting in its composition. The drift of nature is not toward moral perfection, unless we include in nature the regenerating forces which keep it up to its highest level by stimulating the intellectual and spiritual powers. Democracy reckons on the force of unrestrained human nature ; but that is force of unrestrained instinct, and force of unrestrained instinct has not hitherto held out promise of moral elevation. Does it appear likely that America will reverse the tradition of all the ages by rendering discipline superfluous ? Is there evidence that raw liberty is the one condition needful for "realizing the infinite" ? Does observation show that the tendency of our business, society, literature, is heavenward ? Listen to the talk of our parlors ; look at the popular books or papers ; consider the degradation of the stage, made a platform for the display of personal attractions ; note the passion for scenic effect, for decoration, for amusement. Such traits do not proclaim, surely, the triumph of soul over sense. Are these the heralds that announce the coming of the Son of Man ?

It may be conceded that the enormous production of wealth in America, coupled with its general diffusion among all classes of men, is favorable to the prevalence in centers of wealth, all over the country, of the outward attributes of civilization — costly pictures, houses, drapery, dresses, carriages, horses, entertainments. It may even be conceded that forms of social elegance and refinement of manners, accompanied by accomplishments in music, painting, languages, may be found in remote places of the continent where money has accumulated. Wealth enables many to travel in foreign lands. The railroads make communication easy. Visitors come from far-off cities. There must be theaters, opera-houses, lecture halls. The Old World sends its dukes, scholars, writers, artists of every description, to see the country, or to make gain out of its inhabitants; they must be received, attended to, imitated. European ideas, ways, institutions are thus domesticated in our large towns; European fashions take root. This is inevitable. In some respects it works us harm by overlaying our native growth; in other respects it does us good by introducing the results of mature experience. But whether it brings harm or good the product of the contribution should not be attributed to the spread of democratic ideas. Institutions are not responsible for what money has bought; as little can democracy claim what aristocracy has created.

One may go so far as to admit that lovely manners and high conversation are found in many a Western city, without granting the regenerating efficacy of democratic principles. For, where those principles have full sway, such admirable products are least common. Hear what the "Nation," of September 28, 1882, has to say bearing on these points :

"A life of money-getting in the United States is now usually wound up by the construction of a palace, in which a successful dry-goods man, or pork-packer, or operator in stocks drags out the evening of his days in the midst of taste and splendor, for the enjoyment of which he has neither a natural nor acquired capacity."

If any are unwilling to accept the judgment of the "Nation" on the ground that it is not a fervent advocate of republican ideas, they may be inclined to listen to the Boston "Herald," a paper against which no such accusation can be made. Says the "Herald":

"It is a matter of national shame and regret that our moneyed aristocracy is more idealess and frivolous than was ever any other aristocracy, past or present. Because, in all foreign aristocracies there is a certain percentage of persons who give a good account of themselves in literature, reflective thought, science, and art. But our *born* moneyed class are *minus* any intellectual achievements, for which they have such splendid opportunities of leisure, travel, and culture."

This is a severer verdict than that pronounced by the "Nation," and it comes from a city that is famous in revolutionary history, the home of Theodore Parker, and of Wendell Phillips, and of Charles Sumner, to name no other champions of the people's liberty. The "Herald's" charge cannot be put by with the assertion that ours is a young country; for "if such things can be done in the green tree, what may be done in the dry"? Nor can it be set aside by saying that the true democratic spirit has not yet gone into operation, for that is the precise point in question, Has it, or has it not? If it has, the description above quoted stands uncorrected. If it has not, the sooner a new quality is introduced into it the better. Neither paper tells the whole story of American society, for neither paper makes allowance for the influence of woman, which is more actively prevailing in the United States than it is anywhere in Europe or England, and is mainly the cause of whatever social refinement there is. Still, we must remember that women are not as yet responsible for the working of democratic institutions, nor is their influence to be counted in any fair estimate of the advantage hoped for from the democratic idea. Theirs is the use of money earned by laborious husbands and fathers; theirs is the leisure; theirs the opportunity and the desire for travel; theirs the love of music, the taste for pictures, the passion for grace and beauty in the house; for richness and elegance of dress; for luxury of effect; but theirs is not, thus far, a direct accountability for the success or failure of the popular system. Whether they will ever share such accountability, or whether their full participation will prove a benefit, remains a matter of mere conjecture. Here, it is enough to say that whatever bloom they add to our democracy is purely feminine, due to their genius, not to the democratic idea. That is in male hands, and has not, hitherto, given conspicuous promise of glory.

But now it is time to present the other side, to look for the signs of hope in republican institutions. On any fair estimate, the emancipation of moral power, without regard to social conditions,

may justly be put down as a result of the democratic idea. If the republican principle lets loose the lower passions of human nature, it grants full freedom to the exercise of the higher. It removes obstacles; it pulls down barriers; it throws open the field of conscience. Under it all power is available, whether of man or woman; and moral power is honored in the person of its possessor, however humble or however elevated he may be. Respect is paid to the person, not to the circumstance. In monarchical or despotic communities qualities, to be recognized, must bear the stamp of class dignity, rank, or title. The worthy cause must be taken up by some outwardly accredited authority. Plebeian virtue, except in very extraordinary cases, is undemonstrative or disallowed. But a republic gives to all an equal chance and stimulates to activity every particle of spiritual vigor. To appreciate the degree in which this is the case, one must have an opportunity of contrasting the moral liberty that is permitted by our forms with the limitation that is placed on intellectual endeavor in countries which are only comparatively free like England. Even there the spell of conventional respectability lies heavily on all but a few choice spirits. Hence the angry, violent, explosive force with which conscience breaks out whenever occasion offers or evils become unbearable. Hence socialism, communism, nihilism, in their different phases, which present the sense of right as destructive or anarchical. As Emerson puts it:

“The opinion of the million was the terror of the world, and it was attempted either to dissipate it by amusing nations, or to pile it over with strata of society—a layer of soldiers; over that a layer of lords, and a king on the top; with clamps and hoops of castles, garrisons, and police. The Fultons and Watts of politics, believing in unity, saw that it was a power; and by satisfying it (as justice satisfies everybody) through a different disposition of society,—grouping it on a level, instead of piling it into a mountain,—they have contrived to make of this terror the most harmless and energetic form of a state.”

The truth of this is apparent in the efforts at reform which are conspicuous in America, and which can be traced directly to the democratic principle; in the concern of leading minds for the welfare of the people; in the examples of public spirit; in the consecration of talent to the general good; in the prevalence of “isms,”—a wild, but certain sign of aspiration after unattained excellence. A striking feature of moral reform in America is the participation in it of the best minds, the noblest souls, the

men and women of choicest nurture and highest social position. Such feel most keenly their responsibility for the system they live under. They are not idlers, not place-hunters, not pleasure seekers, but free givers of time and strength to the cause of popular enlightenment and progress. These, though few, led the assault on slavery. These are champions of civil service equity. These try to get at the heart of socialism and kindred movements which enlist, in the Old World, the ignorant, passionate, thoughtless, who, having none to fight for them, fight for their own side. In America, to be gifted as a reformer is regarded as a privilege even by reformers themselves.

It has been said that the democratic principle, as commonly interpreted and exemplified, takes the moral fiber out of religion; and so, hitherto, it has done. But the natural must come before the spiritual; the sentimental precedes the intellectual. In the transition from theological dogmatism to intelligent truth, the way lies through aversion to definite opinions. Charity, which covers a multitude of sins, goes in advance of character, which is the fruit of spiritual ideas, and which presupposes thought; so that the present disintegration may prepare the religious mind for some worthier statement of doctrine. The broad church may yet serve as an introduction to the true church, which in due time will be established by the free endeavor of spirits at once enlightened and devout,—spirits that are more concerned to find what is true than what is comfortable, what will save than what will please. Thus the boundless freedom of our institutions will be made to work compensation for the slipshod character of much of our speculation.

In fact, one can hardly say enough about the far-reaching tendency of the most cultivated men and women in our communities, whether writers, preachers, journalists, professors, or obscure toilers. A foreign physician of great distinction in his own country was so fascinated by the opportunity afforded in New York that he resolved to establish himself there, though his relatives lived in Germany, and his reputation as a specialist was fixed in Vienna, while here living was expensive and he had every thing to do. What a commentary on the educated Americans who turn their backs on their own country and live abroad because it is cheaper and easier!

All that can be justly claimed for the democratic idea is opportunity, but opportunity includes all promise; a word of

urgent exhortation must be spoken, therefore, to teachers, preachers, authors, guides of public opinion, on whom the fulfillment of this promise depends. They must work hard if they would counteract the downward tendencies of democratic ideas as vulgarly expounded. Theirs is no holiday task. They are put upon their intelligence and their honor. They seem to be few and far apart in space, but their influence is great, and one bond unites them — the desire to lift democracy from the dust and answer cavilers by facts. Our cause — the cause of a pure democracy or rule of the people — is at stake. Our achievement is in the time to come, not in time past or present. Our victory is yet to win, and it is to be won over those who maintain that the rule of the people in their own behalf is an illusion which experience will rudely dispel. It is for true believers in the republic to prove such a prediction untrue. Where there is no government to prescribe opinion, but only public sentiment, which reflects the controlling mind of the many, the influence of the wisest and best is of the greatest importance. If what has been said is true, the question of the moral import of the democratic system is not a matter of years but of direction, and direction is not the same thing as tendency. Tendency represents unassisted impulse. Direction stands for the utmost that can be achieved by effort. Tendency is the bent of the prevailing will. Direction is the turn of that will to noble ends.

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